

Essay

Bowing to the Dharma: Japanese Buddhist Women Leaders & Healers

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Abstract: The prodigious stream of Japanese Buddhist women in roles of leadership and healing extends the length of Japanese Buddhist history. This article will highlight the transformative power of bowing that helped galvanize Sōtō Zen nuns on the eve of the twentieth century and feature twentieth-century leaders who institutionalized their disciplined commitments. It will also offer a window into the creative healing practices that characterizes women’s activity in the home.

Keywords: bowing; Japanese Zen Buddhism; women; ritual; healing; leadership

1. Introduction

The bamboo outside my study window whispered to me:
When is bowing an act of strength? A poem appeared on the page:

Nature teaches the heart to see.
Ever green,
Bamboo teaches the heart
To be strong,
To bend in the wind.
How can you comprehend sutras
If you do not understand
The supple strength of bamboo?

The bamboo helped me see how Japanese Buddhist women wield the transformative power of bowing. Their bows of gratitude and respect expressed the resilient strength that powered their inspiring leadership and potent healing to generate social and personal change.

Kōshin-san¹, a middle-aged novice Zen nun, feels whole again as her forehead touches the woven *tatami* fiber floor of the worship hall tucked along a quiet street in the metropolis of Nagoya. Releasing an extended exhale, she slowly raises her palms in a gesture of respect and gratitude. Although she has prostrated before this altar every morning for the past two years, today tears of doubt in her self-worth stream down her face even as gratitude wells up from her heart. Swathed in the aroma of incense, intoning the wisdom of interdependence stirred up a well of emotions that rarely find an opening in the midst of rushing to be on time for pre-dawn zazen, remembering all the chants and motions of the morning service, cleaning with vigor, staying alert through lectures, studying in spare moments, and being aware of how each act and word affects others. Kōshin-san had come a long way since she left her 2-decade long career, make-up, and hair behind. Her life had been stable on the outside, but on the

¹ Kōshin is a pseudonym for the Dharma name of a Zen nun author interviewed at Aichi Senmon Nisōdo in Nagoya, Japan in the fall of 1989.

inside her heart churned for deeper meaning and ached for fuller engagement. Unlike the many other rituals she had learned since donning black robes, the *Anan Kōshiki* ceremony viscerally confirmed that her decision to enter the 2500-year-long stream of Buddhist renunciants was worthy. The Indian melody and timbre of the chanting transported Kōshin-san to bow at the feet of Mahāprajāpatī, the first Buddhist nun, as the climax of the ritual heralds her enlightenment.

The profound trust and safety that Kōshin-san experiences as she bows her head to the floor in a room full of people is counterintuitive from an ethological perspective. As an animal behavior, bowing is a potentially dangerous act. You cannot see if something might attack you. When a human consciously enacts a vulnerable posture, then, it signifies something about the context and the relationship of those present. Whether done in fear or trust, bowing can express submission. Bowing can be an embodiment of humility and deep respect. Bowing can demonstrate a depth of gratitude that goes deeper than words can plumb. Whatever the meaning, a ritualized mode of bowing is a form of interacting that transacts power.

Bowing, like all ritualized acts, is encoded with cosmological, ontological, teleological, and ethical assumptions. As with all ritualized activities, bowing inscribes individual and communal identity and orients humans to their landscapes and social expectations. Focusing on the transactive power of ritual bowing reveals the import of Japanese Buddhist women wielding the power of bowing to effect change and create new identities and realities. Bowing is a vital force that undergirds effective leadership and propels experiences of healing. The visceral resonance of bowing is the source of their power as they shape experience and behavior. Ritualized bowing reaches levels of psyche and body that intellectual explanation cannot. Ritualized bowing can evoke change in personal lives and communal settings, for rituals inhabit the cross-currents and contested spaces of institutional, moral, religious, medical, aesthetic, and everyday interactions. Rituals can promote harmony or incite conflict by shaping, stretching, defining, and re-defining the identity of their participants. Engaging in a ritual changes consciousness. The power of ritualized actions is not in their ability to communicate conscious knowledge so much as to frame experience in a way that it may be apprehended meaningfully. They work through the senses to cultivate wisdom in the bones. Ritualized acts can transform experience by dissolving obstacles of time, distance, and structural power. They can help one feel connected to those far away in the past and in places one has never been. Unimpeded by unenlightened activities, rituals can affirm one's worth to oneself and to the world.

In order to understand the wisdom and power of Japanese Buddhist women, I had to critically examine my own assumptions about gender, power, and social dynamics. Opening my mind, I sleuthed for clues that illuminate or obscure the activities and thoughts of the women I sought to understand. Let me share some of the questions I learned to ask. Since it is often not explicit in the statement, when I see a statement like: "women were (or are) viewed as . . ." I always ask "by whom?" Most of the time the statement means "men viewed women as . . ." It is important to make this clear, because keeping the perspective of the statement vague makes it sound like a general statement of fact. The net effect is that women's agency and power is hidden or denied. Other types of statements I pause to examine are: "Women did not . . ." I ask "Where"? or mentally add: "at male institutions." When faced with a statement like "Women could not . . ." I ask, "according to what sources?" or add "according to androcentric sources."

In addition to these types of sentences, there are certain words—whether explicitly stated or implied—that make me pause. They include any variation on the words "official, authority, acknowledge, and recognize." If a statement is that women don't have an official capacity, I want to know by whose authority is something deemed "official," and I want to know what the women did in that context. I assume that women did something. Nobody can do nothing. I assume that women have their own ideas and, hence, authority. Likewise, I want to know who is and who is not acknowledging or recognizing women's contributions or qualities, because it is impossible not to make a contribution in an interdependent world. It is also impossible to have no qualities of being.

Asking these questions has enabled me to see the women who constitute Japanese Buddhist history as powerful and wise leaders in the monastic sphere and potent healers who empower themselves and others in the domestic sphere. Sōtō Zen nuns began the century encumbered by misogynous regulations that had developed like an insidious disease in a sect administration that did not acknowledge nuns' abilities, contributions, commitments, and certainly not their Buddha nature. A significant core of Sōtō nuns was determined to rectify these inequities. Their goal to be treated with respect would require a creative mix of established practices and novel methods, and most of all penetrating awareness of their own worth and Buddha nature.

When Japanese Sōtō Zen women look at history through a lens empowered by nondual wisdom, they see women seriously engaged with Buddhist practice. Despite the historical circumstances that included structural oppression of women, they did not just simply listen to men who did not understand their worth. Just as men did not need women to affirm their existential value, women did not need men to affirm theirs, either. In a cosmology and ontology of interdependence and emptiness, there are no grounds for demeaning and divisive thoughts. From this vantage point, there is no distance to span to reach the ultimate goal of actualizing Buddha-nature in each moment. Though many institutional regulations did not reflect these metaphysics, no regulations could prevent the women from realizing their ultimate goals.

The nuns' actions demonstrate what they thought of themselves. They did not act like women who were just discovering liberation. They acted like women who knew their Buddha-nature. They acted with deliberate and well-reasoned conduct. They knew that nuns were supposed to be full members of the sangha, and they were tired of men not recognizing that. They saw it as a deficiency in the men's awareness of nondual wisdom and they understood Buddhist teachings to be respectful of women. So, they acted with confidence.

The nuns empowered themselves by taking the moral high ground and courageously bowing to the reality of their circumstances. Their bows were not of submission to male authority, but to the Buddha-nature that animates their lives. While bowed down, their vision was not limited by social conventions that would subordinate them. When bowed, they could see deep into their hearts and know in their bones that it was safe to trust the interdependent nature of the universe to support their moral vision of inclusiveness and equal regulations. The moral gravity their actions generated compelled the sect to bend with the arc of justice, for their aims were in accord with the metaphysical principles and ethical values the tradition espouses. They rescinded the sect regulations that capped the highest official rank a nun could hold at a rank lower than the lowest rank of their male counterparts. Bowing was central to the culturally potent ritualized activities in which the nuns engaged to help transform the sect. Bowing both shaped them and shaped the community, dissolving personal and institutional barriers.

2. The Transformative Power of Ritual: Anan Kōshiki

Examining the socio-historical context of the *Anan Kōshiki*² brings into high relief how this ritual was vital to Sōtō Zen nuns establishing formal egalitarian status in the sect. It is a distinctive ritual led by Sōtō Zen 曹洞禪 Buddhist nuns of Aichi Senmon Nisōdō 愛知専門尼僧道, a women's monastery in Nagoya, Japan. Sōtō nuns perform the *Anan Kōshiki* ceremony to thank Ānanda for what they maintain was his act of wisdom in entreating Śākyamuni to allow women to enter the path of the renunciants. Performing the *Anan Kōshiki* started the wave leading to Sōtō nuns fighting for and, by the 1960s, winning equal regulations in the institutional records of the Sōtō Sect administration. In the nineteenth century, Kankō-ni 観光尼 (d. 1884) revived this ceremony. She taught Mizuno Jōrin 水野常倫 (1848–1927), the nun who led the movement to establish an official Sōtō Zen monastery for women.

² For further historical and analytical discussion of this ritual, see (Arai 2000, pp. 119–30).

The monastery was officially established in 1903. Mizuno's disciples were the ones who fought for and won equal regulations in monastic training and teaching ranks.

Kōshiki are rituals of gratitude reserved for only the *highly* revered, such as Śākyamuni and Bodhidharma. Nuns performing the *Kōshiki* humble themselves as they exalt Ananda. Without the nuns having to explain it themselves, praising and offering gratitude to Ananda identifies the nuns for who they really are. They are women in a few millennia long line of women committed to fully living their lives according to the Buddha's teachings. The ritual also highlights the merits of the monastic life, making it explicitly clear that those who enter this path are dedicated people. Therefore, the women who have chosen to become nuns today are validated as serious disciples of the Buddha. The ritual dispels the misinformed image that they are merely trying to escape to the nunnery because they could not succeed at anything else. This legitimizes them as heirs of the Buddha's teachings. The ritual culminates with a declaration that all women can attain enlightenment. Hence, the act of exalting Ananda exalts the nuns. The ritual posture of the nuns throughout, however, is profound gratitude, literally head bowed to floor.

Wielding the *Anan Kōshiki* ritual, nuns legitimized and empowered themselves through the non-contentious expression of gratitude. Without a nun saying she deserved to be respected as a legitimate heir of Buddhism or requesting others to recognize nuns' deep commitment to Buddhist teachings and practice, they just sang praises and verses of gratitude. In so doing, they cultivated the critical skill of resilient strength—like the quality of bamboo—to be flexible and soft as one moves with a power that stands the test of time. The ritual helped them identify themselves as true heirs of the Buddhist renunciant path as they galvanized into a community of women not dissuaded by the male-dominated institutional attempt to treat nuns as though they were less than monks.

The nuns did not have to fight for the right to do this ritual. Doing the *Anan Kōshiki* demonstrates that all monastics are equal. Moreover, by attending the ritual, laity bear witness to nuns being legitimate heirs. They thereby recognize nuns' authority. All present hear the *Anan Kōshiki's* affirmation of nuns, ending with a declaration that all women can attain enlightenment. From this vantage point, the erroneous ways of the male-dominated institution are glaring, yet imminently surmountable. In effect, the *Anan Kōshiki* authorizes nuns to require Buddhist virtue be practiced over sexism.

Through expressions of gratitude, these nuns actualized their empowerment as they accomplished their numerous goals. Not only did they receive the necessary resources to build their own monastic facilities, they rectified their status. In changing the regulations to embody egalitarian Buddhist ethics, these nuns changed the face of the Sōtō Zen institution fueled by a non-confrontational mode of ritualized actions.

3. Exemplary Leader: Kojima

One of the most prominent nuns of the twentieth century was Kojima Kendō 小島賢道 (1898–1995).³ She lived by the Zen dictum of resilience: “Seven times down, eight times up”. Her life is a series of first-time opportunities claimed by and granted to a Sōtō Zen nun. It is no coincidence that Kojima's most zealous and productive years coincide with the period of most rapid progress toward equality for nuns and the sect institutionalizing regulations more in accord with its founder's teachings on nonduality. It is notable that this was also the most turbulent period of Japanese history, spanning the years before and after World War Two when the rhetoric of male military dominance was at a high point. Kojima said that being a nun required a commitment of steel, which she forged in the unbearable heat of blatant discrimination of female monastics.

After WWII ended, Kojima was determined to establish strong awareness of the tradition of Zen monastic women. For seven years she was at the helm of the editorial board of a book on nuns'

³ For fuller historical context, see (Arai 1999).

history, *Sōtō-shū Nisō-shi* (曹洞宗尼僧史 *The History of the Sōtō Sect Nuns*).⁴ The nuns had requested the aid of a Sōtō Zen monastic who was a professor at Aichi Gakuin, who specialized in Sōtō Zen history. Kojima led the Sōtō-shū Nisōdan (曹洞宗尼僧団 *Sōtō Sect Nuns' Organization*), the official organization established by the nuns in 1944 for addressing the needs of Sōtō nuns. Their strategy to concentrate on education bore the desired results. They set out to train nuns to think carefully about what needed to be done, and they produced hundreds of nuns who knew how to dismantle the male power structures that sought to institutionalize the nuns' subordinate status. These nuns of the early and mid-twentieth century had become strong under the hardships of war and the frustrations of unequal sect regulations. They were prepared and poised for action.

Having graduated from Aichi Gakuin (equivalent to high school), Kojima's quest for knowledge was still strong. She forged a path for nuns to attend Komazawa University, the highly reputable Sōtō sect university. She was determined to succeed, because she knew the regulation that kept nuns out was against the egalitarian teachings of the Dharma and Dōgen (1200–1253), the sect's founder. In 1925, she prevailed and attended Komazawa University along with four other nuns: Katō Shinjō, Taniguchi Setsudō, Adachi Teikō, and Kurata Baigaku. Upon returning to the Nisōdō, she and Katō were handed the reins of responsibility to take the Nisōdō into the future.

Kojima attended the 1930 gathering of the most powerful nuns from all parts of Japan. They chose a site of institutional power for their meeting to rectify the proper position of nuns in the Sōtō Zen sect: Eihei-ji, the monastery Dōgen established in 1244 and one of the sect's head temples. Empowered by Buddhist teachings of nondualism, especially of Dōgen's and his successor, Koun Ejō, this group of visionary and determined nuns solidified their concerns and wrote a stalwart resolution with demands for equal treatment by the sect administration.

We monastic women have largely been neglected by members of the sect, to say nothing of general society. The result has been that the institution of the sect has not granted us our natural rights. Due to this negligence, a great number of monastic women have endured under miserable conditions, and the situation has not changed much over time. However, we will not permit the flow of history to stop and leave us in our current situation. We monastic women must awaken from our deep slumber; we must free ourselves from the bonds of iron chains. We must become self-aware of the important destiny to which we have been assigned.

- I. We monastic women are resolved to work to achieve the important mission of educating people along with exerting ourselves to increasingly improve, advance, and cultivate belief in ourselves by looking in the mirror to see our duty and the current of the times.
- II. Beyond accomplishing our duty as monastic women, we are resolved, in the name of this large association to petition to the sect authorities and the institution of the sect to claim the rights as follows in each item.
 - A. We want authorization to designate Dharma heirs.
 - B. We reclaim the right to participate in the governing of each aspect of the sect and to opportunities for education.
 - C. We reclaim the capacity to have appointments in each category of religious teacher.
 - D. We resolve to hold annual seminars that focus upon the various concerns of monastic women.
 - E. We reclaim the right to be granted positions as heads of temples at least as high as those with the status of full-ranking temple.⁵

⁴ See (Tajima 1955).

⁵ See (Tajima 1955, pp. 439–40). Translations are author's.

At their 1937 meeting, they added a resolution that the sect administration officially permit nuns to wear robes in colors commensurate with their rank, not just the black of a novice. In 1944 they formally established the *Sōtō-shū Nisō Gokokudan* (曹洞宗尼僧護国団 Sōtō Sect Nuns Organization for the Protection of the Country). Kojima was elected president and led the organization until 1963. Their motto is “Do not discriminate against [a person’s] sex. This is the True Law of the exquisite and supreme Buddhist Way”. In addition to leading the sect to institutionalize the Dharma’s teachings on nondual wisdom, which includes not discriminating against a person’s gender, they urged monastics to be more socially engaged. The nuns established an orphanage to care for children who lost parents during the war, naming it Lumbini Garden, in honor of the site where the Buddha was born. This orphanage, along with numerous other organizations to support people in need, continue to this day.

After World War Two they re-named themselves the *Sōtō-shū Nisōdan* (Sōtō Sect Nuns’ Organization). With Kojima at the helm of the Nisōdan, they continued to dissolve the bastion of male authority and power in the sect. She traveled extensively in the name of equality, sometimes standing 7 to 10 h on trains to get to sect administration meetings. She was known to pound her fist on the table to emphasize her point, the lone female in the room.

Kojima led the Nisōdan back to Eihei-ji to hold a *sesshin* retreat in December of 1945. They chose to study Dōgen’s *Raihaitokuzui* “Prostrating to the Marrow of Attainment.”⁶ He heeds people to study with a teacher who demonstrates understanding of the Dharma and recounts when women ascended the high seat to teach men in Sung China.⁷ Dōgen signals the consequential power of bowing as an expression of enlightened activity by entitling this fascicle with reference to the legendary moment in the foundation of the Zen tradition when Bodhidharma (5th/6th c.), the founder of Zen, was assessing who would be his successor. He chose Hui-k’o (487?–593), the one who bowed in silence. Bodhidharma recognized the bow as a manifestation of the deepest insight, expressing the marrow of nondual wisdom. The silence underscores the limited capacity of words to express nonduality and the bow signals the need for an expansive embodied expression. Hui-ko’s bow is not a simple bending of his body. He prostrates himself with head down to floor and open palms raised up, humbling himself in a gesture of boundless respect and gratitude. It is a posture of accepting the interdependent flux of reality with no resistance and no fear. Doing so unleashes the transformative power of compassion to circulate, dissolving obstacles to enlightened activity as one harmonizes with the fullness of the present moment. It is significant that bowing appears where Dōgen makes his clearest declaration of and call for gender quality in Zen.

Kojima understood the potency of prostrations to manifest Buddha nature. Honed in such resilient strength, she skillfully and effectively led the sect to be more in accord with Dōgen’s teachings. In 1952, the sect officially heralded her with an award of excellence on Dōgen’s 700th Memorial. Another high point of formal recognition came in 1980 at the 700th memorial service for the second head of the Sōtō sect, Koun Ejō (1198–1280). Since 83-year-old Kojima had been on the front lines working for egalitarian changes, she was the perfect person to be the formal focal of attention. Over 200 nuns attended the ceremony to witness Kojima wearing yellow robes to signify her high rank. She was the first nun to be lead celebrant, *shōkōshi*, in a service at Eihei-ji. Nuns had achieved their goals, and the Sōtō sect shed the dualistic discrimination against women that had stained it for centuries. Though in formal statements she made that day she confessed, “I never thought nuns would hold a ceremony at Eihei-ji.” She was quick, however, to recognize the momentous accomplishment and made it clear that it had taken the efforts of numerous nuns: “We nuns accomplished our goals rather quickly. A true testament to the heart and spirit we put into our actions. It is like being in a dream. The most important

⁶ See (Dōgen 1973, vol. 1, pp. 101–34.). For an English translation see (Dōgen 2007, vol. I, pp. 89–108).

⁷ For a further discussion, see (Miriam 1998).

thing for young nuns is to educate them and mature them in character and not to dilute the nuns' lifestyle."⁸

Kojima's life history is a concrete illustration of the tension between the self-perception of monastic women as equals in the Dharma and their struggle with the institutional authorities. Her story, however is not merely a story about battling the oppressive male-dominated institution. It is a story of creative triumph. Summing up the key to her invincible spirit, she says: "it is important to realize this strength from the outside, but even more important is the inner strength."⁹ Kojima blazed a trail to eradicate all rules that gave preferential treatment to male monastics and brought the sect into accord with its founder's teachings. Wielding a force dualistic thoughts and rules could not thwart—nondual wisdom—Kojima prevailed by bowing to the Dharma.

4. Healing Homes¹⁰

As Nogawa-san had done for more than three decades, after finishing the breakfast dishes, she went to the ornately carved talisman-adorned Buddhist altar that had been in the family for generations to perform her morning ritual of offerings and chanting. She placed a cup of tea in a mug on the altar for her beloved ancestors who upon death became her personal Buddhas. She then lit the candle and a stick of incense. The small room began to fill with the aroma of incense when she glanced at the small clock she placed between the incense burner and the bell. Noting the time, she called out to her husband to take out the garbage, because they were due to collect it any minute. She then struck the bell and put her hands together in prayer, bowing as she quietly chanted the *Heart Sutra* from memory. Today she would also chant the whole *Kannon Sutra*, because it was the twentieth anniversary of her having decided to adopt her sister's child as her own, since her sister already had several children and Nogawa-san had not been able to carry to term. Today is a private anniversary, a chance for Nogawa-san to give thanks to her personal Buddhas for assisting her in becoming a mother.

Gratitude, however, is not all she feels. This anniversary brings up complex feelings of incompleteness and grief for what is not. She does not have to pretend she does not have certain feelings while bowed at her home altar. Here she can surrender to intimacy, for it is a safe place to be vulnerable and honest with herself. Her personal Buddhas do not judge her, for upon death, her beloved family members dissolved all their limited perceptions. In death they can guide her in nondual wisdom and unconditional compassion. Her personal Buddhas now see her from the vantage point of the vast interdependent web of life and death where each being is an integral part of the whole.

Indeed, feeling her personal Buddhas fathom the depths of her heart also helps her heal from the grief of having lost them in life. Communing with them at her altar enables the relationships to continue in deep and subtle ways. Along with Nogawa-san, the other women with whom I consulted for my research on Zen healing rituals also described their home Buddhist altar as an anchor for the household. Whether the altar filled an ornate room or it was a space carved out on the surface of a crowded bureau, having a designated space in the home to bow down allows them to be with heart-wrenching and intractable situations. Designating a safe harbor where they feel compassionately listened to enlarges their perspective on their experiences. Bowing while engaging in ritualized offerings, chanting, and praying on a regular basis are the resources that help fuel their resilience and strength. Though they appear to be simple rituals, requiring no officiant and done in the privacy of their own crowded homes, these rituals constitute the condition in which they experience forceful challenges as well as tremendous empowerment.

The homemade rituals look little like the Zen found in texts, but they exemplify a breed of spiritual practice that thrives in the homes and everyday lives of devout Japanese Buddhists, especially women.

⁸ See (Kojima 1985, p.156).

⁹ See (Kojima 1985, p. 130).

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion on women as healers, see (Arai 2011).

Based on ethnographic research and interviews with women like Nogawa-san, I found that Japanese Zen Buddhist women are a deep, and largely hidden, reservoir of resources for healing that draws on the wisdom of Buddhist traditions. They represent a dynamic current in contemporary Buddhism that has largely gone unnoticed—not just by scholars, but by Japanese society in general. In many cases, even their daughters have not taken time to listen.

For these women, healing is not a state to obtain. Rather, healing is a posture towards life. It is an orientation that leans in to experience reality as a nourishing womb of interdependently related events. The flux of causes and conditions are boundless. Bowing to such vastness is not an act of acquiescing to subordinate status, but an expression of humility. To bow is to be open to the current of the cosmos and not impede its flow. Bowing is a posture of trusting and not being afraid. Bowing does not mean hiding from, ignoring, or denying the challenges and vicissitudes that occur. Rather, bowing in the face of complex emotions and undesired developments helps one integrate them precisely so they do not become hidden emotional land-mines or mental barriers depriving one of a larger sphere of dynamic compassion. Without rigid resistance, a buoyant joy arises and radiates gratitude.

A humble, petite, and devout Zen Buddhist woman's story exemplifies the marrow of a life emanating with the resilient strength of bowing. Kimura-san was in her late sixties when she went to her doctor for her test results. He diagnosed her cancer as incurable. Her response to the prognosis was to create a ritual involving a *tenugui* 手ぬぐい cleaning cloth. To her, this was no common cloth. It was given to her by a highly revered Zen Buddhist abbess, Aoyama Shundō. Kimura-san received it with head bowed, raising the cloth held in both hands slightly above her head in a gesture of humble respect. She was sure the cloth would heal her. Unlike the hundreds she had used to clean and cover things over her decades of life, this one had the calligraphy of the abbess and the image of a figure with hands held in prayer (*Gasshō Dōji* 合掌童子) commissioned by the abbess printed on it. Kimura-san considered the cloth a manifestation of Buddhist wisdom and compassion, of Buddha nature.

The exchange of *tenugui* cloths is ubiquitous in the gift-giving culture of Japan. Everyone must give and receive gifts so often that practical gifts are preferred. Food and cleaning supplies such as soap and towels are among the most common. The abbess had these special cleaning cloths made so she would have something useful to give. She anticipated that the cloths might not be used for cleaning, but she did not imagine they would be used for healing. Kimura-san, though, believed that the *tenugui* cloth had the power to heal her. She lay in bed with one cloth on her pillow and one on her legs, the location of the cancer. More than a dozen years later she still farmed her organic garden and mixed medicinal herbs for everyone's ailments from mosquito bites to arthritis. Doctors had found no traces of cancer in her body. Her eyes twinkled as she leaned over and touched my arm, 「本当だよポーラーさん。あの手ぬぐいで癒されました。」 "It's true Paula-san. My healing came through that cloth."¹¹

Kimura-san bowed to the situation, not in submission, but in humility, fearlessness, and gratitude. Her homemade ritual of placing a *tenugui* cleaning cloth on her legs and pillow helped her feel connected and supported, rather than alone with despair. It gave her a strength that defied all expectations. Her experience and practice of Zen are part of a complex and creative stream that continues to compel people in the ultra high-tech, efficient, and publicly proper conventions of Japan today. This Zen thrives in the spaces where vulnerability can be safely exposed. Relationships of deep trust are essential to see this otherwise hidden side of Zen. It is here—in their homes and hearts—when ritual is healing.

5. Summary Reflections

Japanese Buddhist women turn the process of transformation into an art of understanding the wisdom and skillful means of bowing. Women bow to facilitate a direct experience of interrelatedness,

¹¹ Interview with Kimura. Nagoya, 7 July 1998.

giving rise to gratitude—a place where they can feel at peace and intimately connected. While bowed, barriers collapse, freeing them to connect with family, friends, and would-be foes. Bowing embodies a holistic orientation where even the boundaries of life and death are not divisive, enabling them to feel understood and cared for by deceased loved ones while seated in the safe harbor of their home altar; illuminating the reality that, even in death, no one is alone. It enables them to see everything interrelated in a perpetual dance of change.

Exploring the historical development of Zen nuns and researching the rituals that transform and facilitate the physical and spiritual healing of contemporary Japanese women led me to their wealth of wisdom, strength, humor, and beauty. Their virtuous qualities were mostly cultivated through painful, difficult, and challenging experiences. Through understanding their efforts to find relief from suffering, it becomes evident that the healing power of Buddhist rituals lies in their capacity to provide people with a conduit for experiencing interrelatedness, the lynchpin of their healing process. Healing is a worldview or way of living and facing all kinds of challenges of the non-bifurcated body and mind. For these women, all of life is a process of healing or transformation of the way life is viewed and experienced.

Therefore, whether faced with self-doubt, androcentric regulations, quietly aching for things that cannot be, or cancer, these women bow. With each bow, whether literally or metaphorically, they stop resisting. With each bow, they demonstrate their resilience. They start to flow freely with the powerful current of our interdependent reality, unleashing a torrential force. Institutionalized dualistic regulations that defied wisdom and compassion succumbed to this force. A barren woman became a mother. A terminal disease was foiled. That which does not flow with the current of wisdom and compassion, suffers. That which flows with wisdom and compassion has the power to quell thoughts of unworthiness, thwart unfair practices, ameliorate pain in the heart, and scare away a diagnosis of incurability. Indeed, bowing is a practice of taking refuge with one's entire body, heart, and mind. Connecting Buddhists across time, space, and culture, bowing cultivates resilient strength and transformative power.

As I finished writing these lines, I looked out my window and saw the bamboo nod: *Yes, bowing is an act of strength when done with wisdom and compassion.*

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